Dislocating Modernity

Two Projects by Hannes Meyer in Mexico

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Introduction

At the beginning of the Second World War Hannes Meyer, director of the Bauhaus from 1928 to 1930, emigrated to Mexico, where he worked as an architect and urban planner. But in the years between his dismissal from the Bauhaus and his move to Mexico he had an experience that would inform his later ideas and work. By 1932, Meyer had come to the conclusion that Western Europe was not the right place for the type of socially committed architecture he was seeking to create. Consequently, in 1934, lured by Lenin's large-scale building programme, he went to work in the USSR as part of an international CIAM team of experts in urbanism. In theory, Lenin's programme, which involved brigades made up of hundreds of people organized in a 'machinic' process that could form a complete assembly line of mass production, enabled the various phases of a building scheme to be both organic and rationally regulated. This aspect, combined with Meyer's social ambitions for architecture, appeared to signify a step towards the more scientific architecture that the architect had been advocating since 1926.[1]

But Meyer's hopes for influence in the USSR were short-lived. Soon after his arrival, the modernist aesthetics of Lenin's building programme were thrown aside by Stalin and his government. After completing his Moscow City Plan in 1935, Meyer felt compelled to explain – reasonably enough – that none of his proposals could be adopted, as the city was simply growing too fast for planners to keep up. To CIAM members, this negative critical contribution to the five-year urban development of Moscow appeared even more of a failure when the monumental style was reinstated as the official language for government buildings.

Following a brief stay in Switzerland, Meyer went to Mexico in 1938, for the International Congress of Town Planning. President Lazaro Cardenas had recently injected new life into the principles of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Between 1934 and 1938 he had distributed some 37 million acres of land to more than 800,000 penniless peasants and had substantially increased financial assistance to agricultural cooperatives; in 1938 he nationalized the foreign oil companies; and, in the field of architecture, Mexico had been the first country in Latin America to throw off the shackles of academicism.[2] Paradoxically, this was a consequence of ten years of continuous shifts between a cult of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, inherited from academic institutions before the Revolution, and a more mystical philosophy originated by Jose Vasconcelos, the Mexican philosopher and, between 1921 and 1924, minister of education. Although Vasconcelos's educational reforms were in keeping with the ideals of the Revolution, which saw in education the means by which the Mexican people might recognize the values of what he called the 'raza cosmica', they were later rejected by Cardenas's government, which was moving towards a new cult of reason based on Marxism.[3] In modern architecture, the government saw an expression that matched its progressive policy.

This was not a totally new development; since 1924, the first postrevolutionary government had been pushing the idea that the 'new' Mexico would need much better and more extensive public services. It was in this context that a young Mexican architect, Juan O'Gorman, also a member of the Communist Party, began promoting an architecture based on technological supremacy. Clearly influenced by Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, he argued that there had been a revolution in construction methods and that what was now needed was an architectural practice that would use these to meet the needs of the fast-growing population. Le Corbusier's book presented a challenge to young Mexican architects – O'Gorman, Juan Legarreta and José Villagrán among others – and although their reading of his text was, to some extent, selective, it provided a platform from which they might set their ideas to work in the Mexican context. Between 1928 and 1934 this was expressed through the mass construction of schools and hospitals, but the problem of housing had yet to be addressed. This was due in part to the absence in Mexico of a public institution supporting the development of ideas on the subject, but also significant is the fact that O'Gorman, who was by then a leading figure in architecture, was focused on promoting his own rather narrower ambition of designing functionalist houses. Had Meyer arrived in Mexico in 1934 and picked up where O'Gorman had left off, the development of Mexican architecture might tell a very different story, but by June 1939, when Meyer accepted an invitation to become director of the newly formed Institute of Town and National Planning of Mexico, any momentum for a social housing policy had been lost. Realizing that the country was urgently in need of the services of town planners, Meyer attempted to balance his teaching at the institute with an involvement in practical tasks. But the institute was to last only two years, swept away by a new government.

Following the institute's closure, Meyer briefly set up his own practice, but in 1942 he reentered the public sphere in a capacity that was more in keeping with his abilities and his views on architecture, as technical director of projects for the Ministry of Labour. There he was put in charge of standardizing various forms of housing and planning several housing estates. In 1944, when

the Minister of Labour became the head of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), Meyer followed him to this new department, where he was appointed architectural secretary of the planning commission for hospitals and clinics. Together with the medical secretary, Meyer's task was to work out a network of clinics for this newly formed institute and to set up a programme enabling the construction of the first two hospitals for the IMSS. Between 1945 and 1947 Meyer also put together the National Committee for School Building (CAPFCE), preparing the 1944–6 report of this organization.

During his ten years in Mexico (1938–47), Meyer's thoughts and projects provoked extreme reactions in his colleagues. However, Meyer's influence on the Mexican architectural consciousness stems from his vision of the architect as responsible for a technological architecture, one that might offer an alternative way of life and which would improve or transform human consciousness. This was a 'new' ideal – a political agenda – for Mexican society of that time, a modern project in every respect. A lecture given by Meyer just after his arrival clarifies the point:

> Only this process of economic freedom for the people of Mexico can lead to organized planning on a national scale, by which all the essential needs of the people – cultural and material – are included and formally realized in a democratic way.[4]

Such statements were criticized by Meyer's critics, who accused him of talking and planning, but achieving little. Nevertheless, the Mexican government relied heavily on him. While for Meyer this was the last chance to implement his sociopolitical design strategies on a national scale, for the government his architecture was to be the launchpad for a new society.

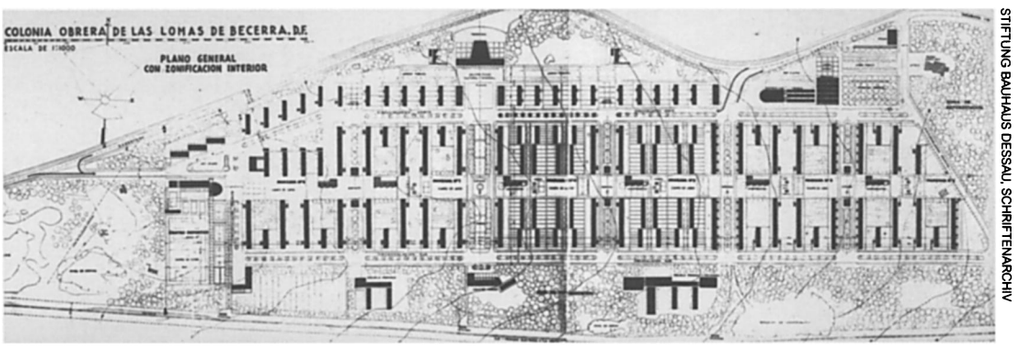
1. Hannes Meyer's proposal for Colonia Obrera in Lomas de Becerra, Mexico D.F., 1942

During the 1930s, Mexico City experienced phenomenal population growth. The Mexican Revolution had destroyed the balance between the rural and urban populations, and by 1933 the country's capital was growing faster than any other city in the Americas.[5]

To be located in the western hills of the Valle de Mexico, the ambitious project for Colonia Obrera aimed at developing an entirely new community that incorporated housing, commerce and industry. The 62 hectares of land that made up the site were situated on the periphery of the semi-industrial zones of Tacubaya and San Pedro de los Pinos, and a zone of specialized industry in Santa Fe. The site had a pronounced slope (1:25) towards the east and reached a maximum height of 150 metres above the lowest point of the valley, thus commanding a superb view.

The task of testing the mechanisms of scientific urban planning at such a large scale was an irresistible challenge for Meyer, and his desire to create 'standard organic building entities for the socialist practice of life' drove him to focus the project on a specific understanding of what the subject required.[6] As a starting point, he suggested that the social makeup of the future population would be determined by the industrial areas surrounding it. Thus there are two important entrances to the complex: one, on the west side, from the Santa Fe area; and the other from Mexico City, on the east side.

The internal pattern of the development follows what Meyer had previously described as an integral cooperative system.[7] In his view this would eliminate the possibility of speculators attempting to develop private housing. The estate was made up of six residential districts, each with its



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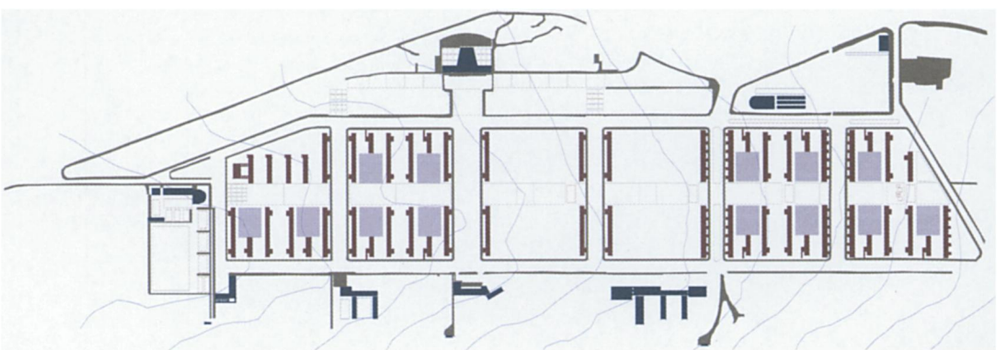
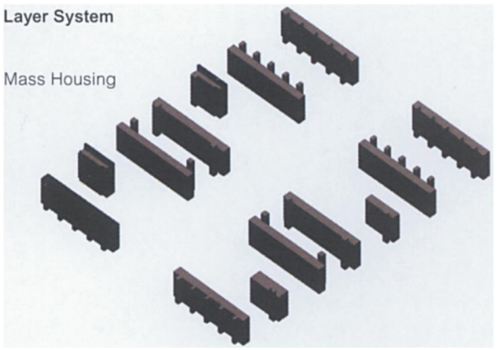
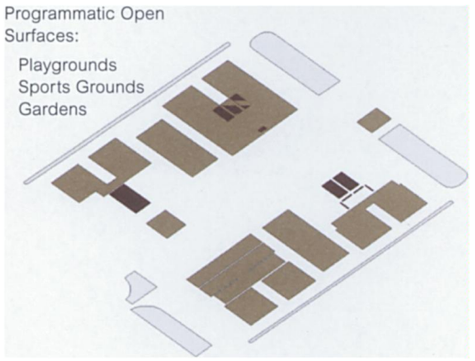
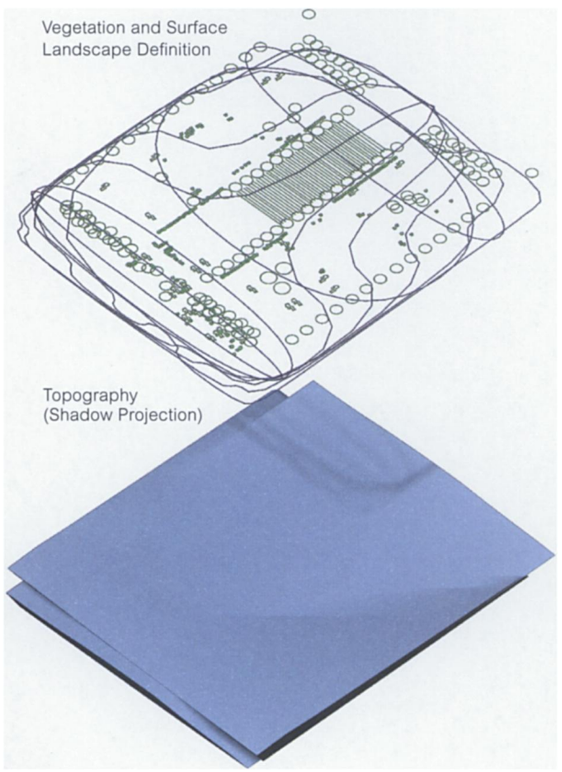
Hannes Meyer, Project for the Lomas de Becerra Housing Estate, Tacubaya, Mexico City, 1942

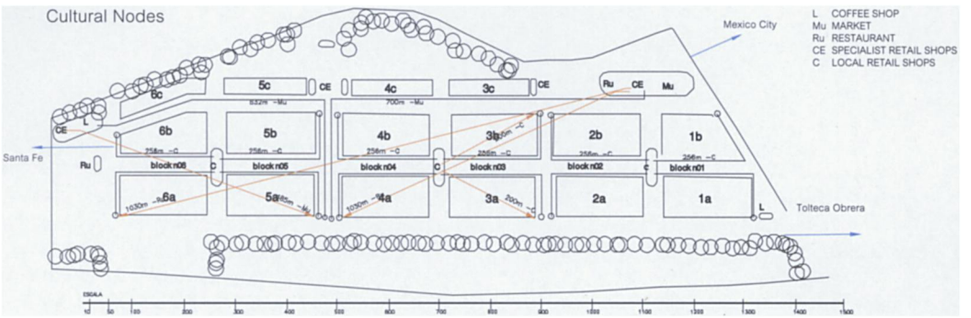


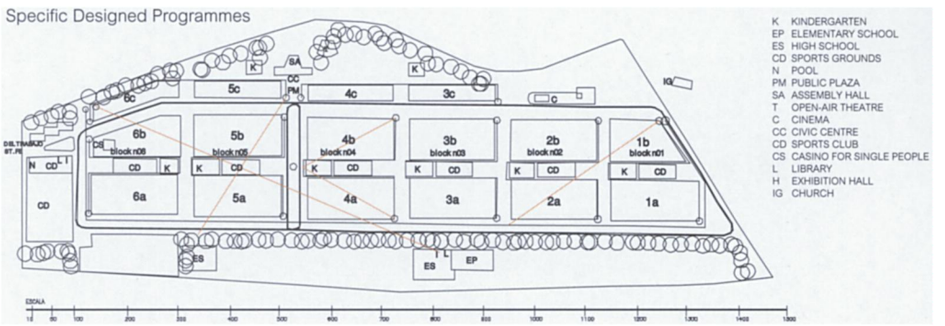


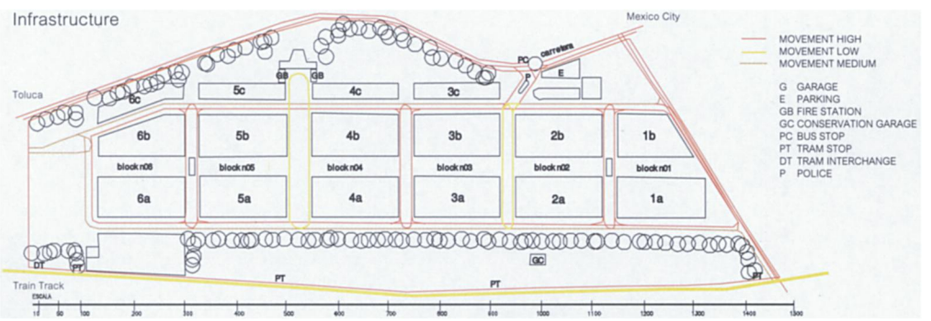




System Variables







own kindergarten and playing field. There were three small shopping centres, each one serving two districts. As each district covered 3.6 hectares, Meyer argued that there could be some flexibility in the housing layout. In the future, the dwelling units could take one of three forms: the vertical system of three- or four-storey blocks of flats; the horizontal system of self-contained houses of one or two storeys; or a combination of the two systems. All the blocks were aligned north to south, providing uniform orientation and maximum sunlight.

Between each of the blocks were two 40-metre-wide green zones where the kindergarten, playgrounds, open fields, and other facilities were located. On the two extremes of the playing fields, Meyer continued the strip, giving shape to a linear perimeter park that provided a green corridor along which pedestrians and children could reach the kindergartens, shops and sports grounds by the shortest route, all the while avoiding the main vehicular roads.

The project as a whole treated the car as the primary means of transport for its inhabitants. Meyer provided two traffic systems: internal traffic was routed along a 2800-metre bypass – which didn't intersect the residential districts but was simply tangential to the side streets – while connecting points played an important role in supplying the 'cultural and material needs' of the estate. Provisions for external traffic were already in place: on the north side there was a road connecting the old town of La Venta with the city of Toluca, and on the south side was the Tacubaya–La Venta tramline.

In the southern green band, Meyer located the medical and educational centres. Finally, the civic, cultural and trade union centre was on the northern side, located on an open terrace surrounded by a leisure park that provided a screen of trees against the north winds and was, according to Meyer, 'a focus of activities, where the sports centre is on the highest point', on the western side of the estate.

At first glance, the original plan seems as authoritative as any master plan. Every building is defined, and to a certain extent the uses of the different open spaces are fixed and clearly limited. This is even more apparent in the block sector plans, where the figure-ground representation technique defines the building blocks, distinguishing them from the plot boundaries. Yet if the plan were in fact as rigid as it appears, Meyer's proposal would have been no different to any other modernist project, following the generic qualities of the International Style such as the open urban plan and the use of new materials, transparency and abstract forms. Instead, a careful deconstruction of the different layers by which the overall plan seeks to represent 'what will be there' suggests that Meyer was redefining the meaning of community. His project was a visual explanation of a community's spatial needs as they evolve over time. Consequently, Meyer's proposal included not only a representation of how the space was going to be arranged, but also a dense network of charts, formulae and diagrams through which he attempted to define the site boundaries, the position of the dwelling blocks, the distances from one place to another, the traffic flow, etc. As a result, the housing is concealed within innumerable spaces and activities. In the architect's words, the fundamental goal of the design was to promote social cohesion by integrating the housing programme into a series of diverse events. Thus planning becomes a formal device to represent the interlocking of social and cultural spatial configurations.

The Colonia Obrera proposal was one of the first complete attempts to define an architectural project not only in terms of what was going to be built, but also in terms of the different possibilities offered by future conditions inside the complex. While the proposal reflects Meyer's solution to the crucial problem of urban growth, it is also an attempt to devise an architectural idiom that would force people to confront their reality with what it is not, to shock people into visualizing a different society – to make them 'aware of other possibilities'.

Meyer's 1921 project for the Siedlung Freidorf had been his first attempt to create an urban project that addressed the potential of variable housing types as a way of engaging with urban growth, and it is the antecedent to his project for Lomas de Becerra. Meyer's use of diagrams and 'scientific language' to speculate about future development – what one might describe as the proposal's incompleteness – can also be viewed as a means of achieving a certain objectivity in the definition of form and function. It also assaults the concept of authorship and thus opens up a further question: if the diagram is, by itself, capable of suggesting possible and multiple options by which the design can be detached from any determinate position, is it possible to argue that it is only by allowing a representation of the project to remain at the level of the diagrammatic that a strategic process can be framed and the content defined? Being far away from Europe, and the architectural theorizing of the modern movement and the CIAM, Meyer had the opportunity to redefine notions of form and content, basing them on his deep social commitment and on the relationship between an objective and 'scientific' definition of programme.

By the time Meyer presented his proposal for the Colonia Obrera, the Ministry of Labour was already curtailing the development of these high-density, low-cost housing experiments. Newly elected President Avila Camacho, more cautious than his predecessor, quietly dismantled this ambitious project. It was not until the late 1940s, under a new president, that the government returned to the issue, now under the name 'multifamiliares'. Between 1946 and 1952, Mario Pani built three multifamiliares, one of them on the site of Meyer's Colonia Obrera project. In spite of the differences between the schemes, the notion of cooperative community was a common element. It was later adopted as a central tenet of many other such projects in Mexico City.

2. Hannes Meyer's proposal for the Corpus Christi block in front of Juarez's monument in the Alameda Central, Mexico City, 1947

Towards the end of his stay in Mexico, the political environment that had originally attracted Meyer to the country had changed. The new right-wing government dismantled the last ambitious project in which Meyer took part, and during the final two years of his stay (1947–8) Meyer received only a few private commissions. Among them was a project for the new headquarters of the Banco Internacional and the Banco Nacional de Mexico, which Meyer called a 'development project for the Manzana de Corpus Christi', understanding the commission more as an urban proposition than as an architectural solution.

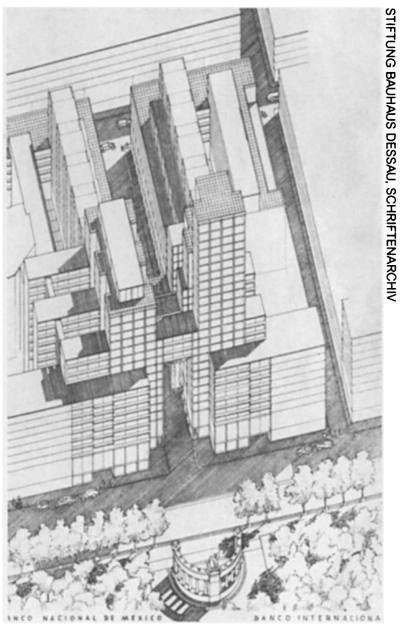
The site is located in an area where the regular grid of the historic centre increases in size to the extent that the transition of scale seems to be the underlying theme of the project (which comprises an entire urban block). At the same time, the clients required a programme of offices and dwellings with a higher density than that of the surrounding area. Meyer chose to achieve this densification by increasing the height of the building while also opening up the complex by creating a pedestrian street that connected the front façade – which overlooked a park – to the back street.

This was not done simply for effect; it also allowed the preservation of a sixteenth-century church on the site. This, together with the axis of circulation dictated by the nearby monument to Juarez and the pedestrian street, became the key element of the project. Furthermore, the rhythm of activities between the shops on the ground floor, the church and the tower dwellings and offices activated the entire block. Performing a deconstructive operation on the different layers on which the overall urban scheme operates – transparency, anchor points and heights – reveals the existence of the base materials of modernism – the open plan, abstract forms, transparency and spatial flow – at the heart of this project.

At Corpus Christi, as with the Colonia Obrera project, Meyer did not use the open plan because of its tectonic rationalism (as Le Corbusier would have) but to create a spatial dynamism between the different levels of the buildings. Transparency is deployed not to show the qualities of new materials, but as an operative device to homogenize the levels of natural light within the block. Similarly, abstract forms are deployed to constitute singular urban gestures rather than machinic references.

As part of the development of the project, Meyer produced a set of diagrams to explain the different paths the proposal might take according to the priorities given to office space, car access and exposure to natural light. One of these proposed an internal street dividing the complex, with three bridges linking the buildings at various heights above street level. Another option considered only a pedestrian 'passage' that connected the front porch on the park side with the church atrium on the back.

The various tower blocks had a minimum height of 20 storeys and were stepped back to allow maximum natural light to reach street level. Some would rise an additional ten storeys depending on their location within the block. The two towers facing the park side were stepped back in three segments, with the highest part facing the park. On the back street side, where the average height of the surrounding buildings was lower, Meyer kept the towers lower.



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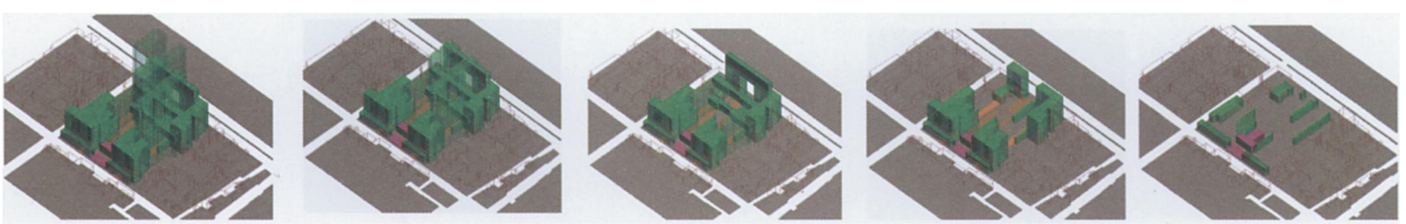
Hannes Meyer, Axonometric, Corpus Christi Mixed-Use Project, Mexico City, 1947

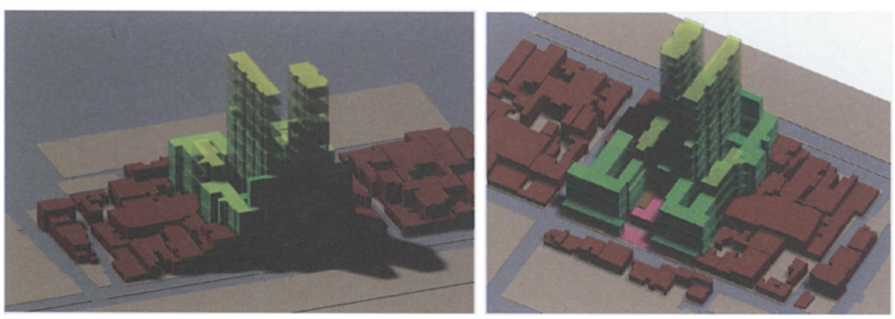
A careful examination of the axonometric showing the 'bridges' proposal suggests that Meyer conceived of the transparent glass façades as a possible organizing element for the public spaces on the ground floor. Indeed, at Corpus Christi it seems that Meyer was now more interested in the project as a formal exercise within the

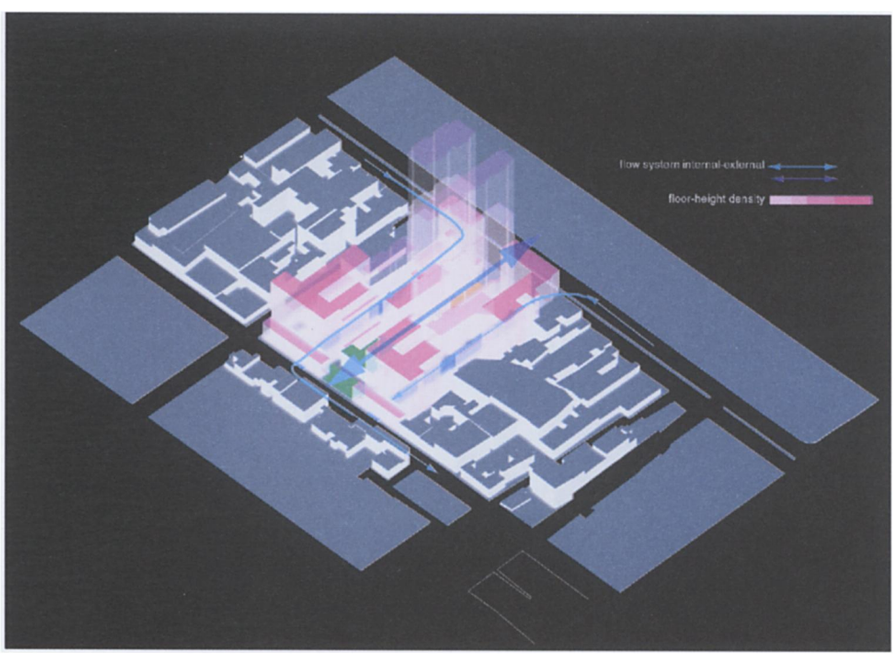


Four points anchor the building

Light As a Formal Device

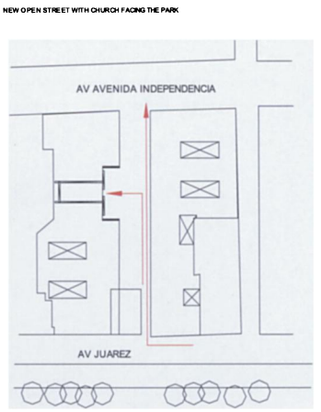
The project allows natural light to penetrate the public spaces, while the exterior is recessed so as to avoid generating shadows on the street.

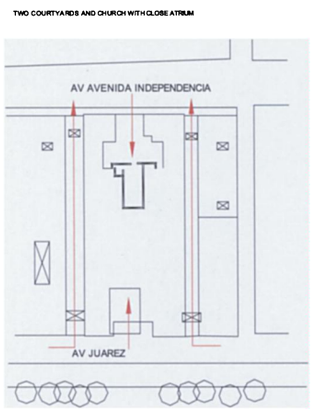


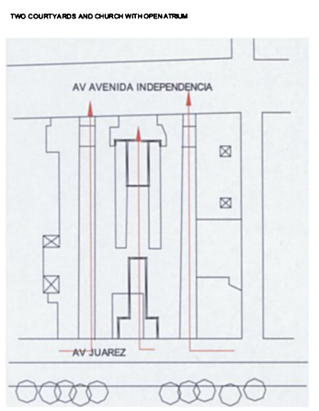


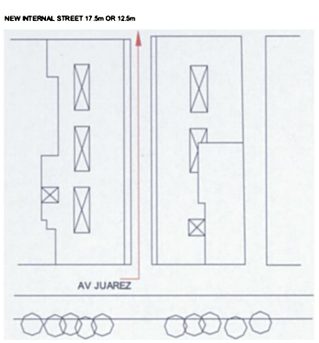
GENERATIVE MODULE
1.5 METRES

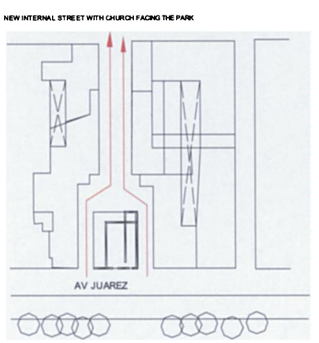
COMPARATIVE SCHEMES

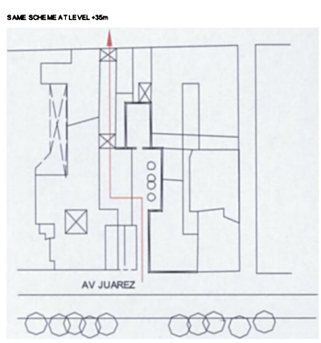












Intensive Variable Systems

A flexible range of systems allows natural light into the enclosed public spaces at ground level. As a result, public and private spaces are only differentiated by their vertical positioning.

rational style rather than as the exercise in the use of architecture to solve social problems that had driven the Colonia Obrera project. If there is a 'democracy' in this project it is formal (the distribution of natural light) rather than social. Perhaps this change reflects the fact that Meyer now found himself working on a commercial project in a country that had, broadly speaking, aligned itself with capitalism. Although the Corpus Christi project retains the 'scientific' mode of presentation that Meyer had evolved in his earlier work (such as the Siedlung Friedorf project) and still attempts to deal, to some degree, with the issues of social organization that are involved in any work at the urban scale, it represents the Swiss architect's clearest attempt to present a modern Mexican architectural language within the framework of rationalism. One of Meyer's alternative design options, involving the setback of the main tower block to generate an open public 'arcade', was a strategy that came into common use in the work of Mexican architects (notably Augusto H. Alvarez) during the following decade.

Conclusion

Apart from his early works in Germany between 1920 and 1928, Hannes Meyer had, until recently, been largely overlooked by architectural historians. However, the recent reevaluation of his work and thoughts seems to be driven by an appreciation of the emancipatory influence of philosophical thought on architecture. Meyer's contact with Adolf Behner and Walter Benjamin, among others, reflects this type of exchange and a deep connection of their ideas. In their respective commitments to forms of democracy, both the Colonia Obrera and Corpus Christi projects (and, in some respects, Meyer's Plan for Greater Moscow) demonstrate such a synthesis of design and ideology. In both the Soviet Union and Mexico, the concept of a design strategy based on a degree of incompletion (leaving room for future development) was threatening to the governments who had commissioned Meyer's work. But despite this hostility, he succeeded in forcing a rereading of the meaning of modernity as the phenomena of the heterogeneous.

Notes

1. Meyer never actually labelled his architecture 'scientific', but he repeatedly used scientific notations as modes of representation for his competition projects. It can also be said that Meyer tried to create a more rigorous and objective approach to architectural proposals by subjecting them to his belief that 'all things in this world are a product of the formula: function = time x economics'. His modes of representation have been associated more recently with the term 'scientific' by K. Michael Hays in 'Diagramming the New World, or Hannes Meyer's "Scientification" of Architecture' in *The Architecture of Science*, eds. Peter Galison and Emily Thompson (London, 1999), pp. 233–50.
2. See Edward Burian, *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico* (Austin, Texas, 1997), pp. 14–40.
3. For more on Vasconcelos's 'raza cosmica', see V. Jose, *A Mexican Ulysses* (London, 1963).
4. 'Solo este proceso de liberacion economica del pueblo mexicano abre paso a una planificacion nacional ordenada, en que todas las necesidades de vida del pueblo, materiales y culturales, se encuentran comprendidas y plasticamente realizadas en formas democraticas'. Hannes Meyer, 'Experiencias de Urbanismo' in *Arquitectura y Decoracion* (Mexico, 1938), p. 257. English translation by the author.
5. Planeta, ed., *Atlas Historico de Mexico*, Vol. 2 (Mexico, 1985).
6. Hannes Meyer in C. Schnaidt, *Hannes Meyer Building: Projects and Writings* (London, 1965), p. 78.
7. For an extended analysis of the co-op projects, see Schnaidt, above.